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8 January 1973

No. 1616/73

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Assessment of the Washington Post Series,
"Russia's Changing Empire"

The series offers a generally interesting and useful view of the USSR and its Warsaw Pact allies by two knowledgeable and experienced journalists, Robert G. Kaiser and Dan Morgan. Their thesis: "However the Soviet world may evolve in the future, it has already reached a stage that does not conform to the images evoked by the phrase 'the Soviet bloc.'" Kaiser and Morgan massively illustrated their modest point, offering a shifting panorama, somewhat blurred and shadowed. Avoiding predictions, they prudently retreated behind a disclaimer: "Communist Europe has become a graveyard for prognosticators."

Within the limitations they set for themselves, Kaiser and Morgan presented an illuminating survey. It ran more broad than deep, and more wordy than incisive. They reported what they observed during five weeks last summer when they traded assignments, Mr. Morgan taking over Mr. Kaiser's Moscow post and Mr. Kaiser traveling through Mr. Morgan's East European beat. The change in assignments brought fresh impressions to each. They supplemented their trip observations, according to the Post, with "the months of reporting and research that followed."

Kaiser and Morgan were outsiders looking in, presumably with no special access to secrets, and they acquired no startling information. They did

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collect voluminous impressions. Some of these are dubious, such as their observation that in the USSR "there is great popular nostalgia for the Stalin years." Others are unsensational: "Diversity in Eastern Europe is also a result of ancient relationships among the satellite countries." Some hit the bull's-eye, notably their reference to "the over-publicized dissidents, whose headlines in the West far outweigh their influence in the Soviet Union."

In describing the "diversity and tensions within Communist Europe, which seem to contradict the old stereotypes," Kaiser and Morgan sought out contrasts between the USSR and its East European neighbors. They reported that "the creative intellectuals of Eastern Europe are governed by a vaguer line than Moscow's," and that East European youth represent "the pressure for change and modernization," while the youth of the Soviet Union "are far more conformist--one might say inert." Also, "Soviet sociology is far behind the East European vanguard." While searching for diversity, they also turned up an overwhelming similarity: "From Leningrad to Prague and Bucharest, the cities of Communist Europe are typified by peeling paint and muddy streets, crumbling facades and cracking sidewalks.... The poor quality of housing tends to shape the entire quality of life in the urban environment of the Communist world."

The Kaiser-Morgan thesis of an Eastern Europe drawing away from the USSR follows these lines: "Many of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe are acting with surprising independence, apparently with Moscow's approval.... Culturally, intellectually, even institutionally, the junior partners in the empire tend to ignore Moscow.... None of [the East European countries] seriously follows the Soviet party line, except in foreign policy, and some are edging toward apparent heresy.... The East Europeans are drawn naturally to the West." Nevertheless, a counter-argument also runs throughout the series, as Kaiser and Morgan noted from conversations with East Europeans: "Perhaps most important, all of them felt that their own future depended more on events in Moscow than

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on events in their own capitals.... No East Europeans challenged the implication of the phrase, 'the Russian empire'.... The key to the future in Eastern Europe is Moscow's attitude." Such statements would suggest that "Russia's Changing Empire" is not changing all that much.

If the inclusion of contradictory generalizations tended to blunt the thrust of the Kaiser-Morgan argument, it nevertheless testified to honest reporting. For contradictions are prominent features of the vast scene the two men explored. They made an apt allusion to that very problem: "The Soviets have contradictory inclinations; they want the Western powers to recognize and cooperate with Communist power in Eastern Europe, but they also want to retain ultimate control in the area." And, "Taken together, Soviet moves since 1968 suggest an attempt to find new and more practical means of exercising ultimate control over the East European empire." Such a means has not yet emerged, nor has the Brezhnev doctrine yet withered away. Kaiser and Morgan would seem to be forecasting a means of control more genteel than the invasions of Hungary in 1956 and of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which they characterized as public relations disasters. Journalists may give greater weight to the public relations aspects of brutal exercises of military force than do the rulers of great powers.

An unfortunate deficiency in the series is the tendency to overdo the degree of freedom tolerated by the East European regimes and by the USSR in dealing with these regimes. The authors slip into the trap of equating consumerism with revisionism, liberalism, and a pro-Western orientation. One could easily gain the impression that Social Democrats, not Communists, control several of Moscow's client states, and that complete harmony between the ruled and the rulers of Eastern Europe awaits only a solution to chronic housing shortages. The influence of the Yugoslav example on Eastern Europe is exaggerated. The articles underplay the significance of the USSR's

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size and its role as a great power. The series also suggests that certain issues receive far less attention in the Soviet Union than in Eastern Europe. Yet the problems of urbanization and demographic controls, the implications of scientific and technological progress, and various other questions are discussed in the USSR, sometimes rather heretically. These, however, usually are found only in the more obscure professional journals or provincial publications.

On balance, the articles contain useful raw information for general readers interested in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

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